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ABSTRACT

Sex role stereotyping is the process by which people are defined by their sex rather than by their thoughts, feelings, interests, and abilities. It is the portrayal of people in typical situations as determined by their sex and does not allow either males or females to express the totality of their humanity. This paper discusses the problem of sex role stereotyping in terms of school children and the sex role messages communicated to them through the schools. A brief summary of the findings of a study of sex bias in reading materials conducted by Women on Words and Images is presented. Numerous recommendations on how to deal with the situation in the schools and in children's reading materials are offered and include the following: complaining to publishers, principals, school boards, and so on; using outside materials more extensively in the classroom; revising teacher's manuals for existing texts; playing role-reversal games; and having children compare their images of the ideal woman to their images of the ideal man. (TO)

DOES MAMA BEAR ALWAYS SERVE THE PORRIDGE?

SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPING IN SCHOOL READING MATERIALS

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DOES MAMA BEAR ALWAYS SERVE THE PORRIDGE?
SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPING IN SCHOOL READING MATERIALS

Sex-role stereotyping is the process by which people are defined by their sex, rather than by their thoughts, feelings, interests, abilities. It is the portrayal of people in "typical" situations as determined by their sex, and does not allow either males or females to express the totality of their humanity.

It is the opinion of the authors that most of us are guilty of relating to others in terms of their conformity with stereotypes. We have a concept of what a person should be and we expect him/her to behave in accordance with the role model. As teachers, we not only expect this conformity, we reward those students who do conform and punish those who do not. We expect girls to be strong academically and boys to be strong physically. Physical strength in girls and superlative academic achievement in boys are generally treated with distrust and negative reinforcement. A reasonable explanation of why this is so does not come to mind easily. It is the purpose of this paper, therefore, to discuss the problem in terms of the children we work with everyday, and the sex-role messages communicated to them through our schools.

The controversy over sex-role stereotyping has come to be associated with the feminists. In our minds the problem involves both sexes. Women are given the fewest options and are therefore

most limited by role definitions, but men, according to stereotype, are placed under tremendous pressure to do, and to succeed at doing. The feminists are most vocal with their complaints, but the problem, as it pertains to males, should not be overlooked.

The importance of the schools and school personnel in terms of providing students with role models is awesome. And yet sexist attitudes are everywhere:

1. Sexist attitudes are apparent in school curricula. Courses often do not give proper attention to the contributions of women--particularly in the fields of literature, history, and science. Courses are often segregated--home economics for girls and industrial arts for boys, for example--and students interested in taking the "wrong" course are often refused the opportunity.

2. In terms of school staffing, women for the most part are found at the lower levels and in certain types of jobs such as elementary teachers, librarians, and English teachers. This is a poor situation not only for the women involved, but also for the students because it communicates to them the idea that responsibility and achievement are sex-based--that it is inappropriate for men to be concerned with the development of young children and that women are not equal to leadership roles. The message communicated is that men must lead and women must follow.

3. The Guidance Office often houses sex-biased attitudes. The counselors should be sure that meterials and advice available to students concerning programs of study, courses, careers, standardized tests, vocational preference tests, etc., are free from bias. Both sexes should be encouraged to become doctors,

executives, administrators; nurses, secretaries, and teachers.

4. Extra-curricular and co-curricular activities need to be included. Although athletic programs have received a great deal of attention lately, other programs are just as biased. Membership and opportunities for participation in clubs, athletic programs, social service organizations, and musical associations should be available to everyone, and program funding should be equalized.

5. On a day-to-day basis our own exchanges with students are of importance. Punishing boys by making them sit with the girls teaches everyone more than discipline. And having boys help with heavy tasks while girls perform verbally only reinforces unnatural sex differences.

6. Sexist attitudes are also apparent in instructional materials in that the materials identify personality traits with sex; women are often characterized as being weak, fearful, self-effacing; men are strong, assertive, and independent; women's accomplishments in a wide variety of fields are given very little attention.

Women on Words and Images, a group working out of Princeton, New Jersey, completed a study in 1972 of school reading materials. Their purpose was to locate an unbiased reading series. They found none, and compiled their results in a booklet entitled Dick & Jane as Victims; Sex Stereotyping in Children's Readers. (An informative slide presentation was also developed; see Bibliography for address.) Because the study was conducted by women, their main concern is the sex-role stereotyping of females. As mentioned previously, the problem also relates to males. While the opportunities presented

to females are limited in both number and scope, the opportunities for males, while plentiful, are also limited in that all males are portrayed as strong, both physically and emotionally, and excel at whatever they choose to do.

The statements which follow are a brief summary of the findings of the study.[1] These comments are not intended to be all-inclusive or specific in terms of story and publisher.

On a quantitative level, 2760 stories were studies from 134 elementary readers published by 14 different companies. Boy-centered stories outnumbered girl-centered stories by a 5:2 ratio; adult male characters outnumbered adult female characters by a 3:1 ratio; male biographies outnumbered female biographies by a 6:1 ratio; and male folk or fantasy stories outnumbered female folk or fantasy stories by a 4:1 ratio. Of the stories studies, women were portrayed in 26 occupations, men in 147 occupations.

The differences were maintained on a qualitative level. The male-oriented stories are based on themes of "active mastery." Male characters exhibit traits that are positive and desirable--traits generally considered to be necessary for survival. Boys make things, and are resourceful in doing so. Boys are creative and industrious, and persist at chosen tasks despite opposition and criticism. Boys are heroes, saving everything from adults to children to planes and spaceships. Girls, if at all brave, generally assist the boys, or help younger children or small animals. Both boys and girls spend time being helpful to others. However, boys are generally allowed to be helpful, whereas girls are expected to be. The types of helpful activities also differ. Boys often help

others learn, grow, and develop while girls' helpfulness is usually expended on tedious, dead-end jobs. The stories whose central characters are concerned with becoming adults generally show boys growing up to become men, and girls growing up to become mothers. Girls are less able than boys to solve problems, and the concept of "doing a woman's job" in no way conveys the same stature as "doing a man's job." Aspiring boys in the readers perform tasks that earn money; aspiring girls are expected to marry rich men. Boys win at everything. Girls, if they win, generally do so by accident or with the boys' help. Boys are curious and adventuresome; their fantasizing takes them to the ends of the earth in dozens of roles. Girls generally experience the world from a window and spend much of their time playing house. Boys are independent and succeed at what they do simply because they are boys. Girls must be better than boys in order to gain any recognition.

The female-centered stories are based on "second sex" themes. Girls are shown to be not responsible for their own lives. They see themselves as "the other"--as people who support those who act or as those who provide a background for action. Girls are dependent and docile. They play house instead of building one. They watch others, and call on others for help even when they can handle the situation alone. They are kind and helpful, but generally in a self-sacrificing manner. Boys, too, are kind, but seldom self-sacrificing. Girls help individuals; boys help whole communities. Both boys and girls have accidents. But boys' accidents generally happen as the result of activity; girls' accidents are associated

with their responsibilities at home or are simply the result of their being girls. In addition, once an accident has occurred, girls are seldom given a second chance to succeed. Girls fail, and just to emphasize the point, boys succeed at the girls' failings. Both boys and girls ridicule girls as a group for being incapable, uninteresting, silly, vain, etc. Boys show little emotion of any kind; girls show them all, in the extreme. Boys spend no time concerning themselves with their appearance; girls preen constantly.

The stereotypes are maintained by the adult role models in the readers. Mothers work only out of dire necessity. Their place is in the home and they are the perfect servants. Outside of routine household chores, they do nothing. On the other hand, fathers are fun. They go places with the children, and of course they're always on hand to solve problems.

Seldom in the readers do fathers compliment girls' intelligence rather than their looks. Moments of indecision and how to deal with it are infrequently portrayed. One-parent families, adopted children, divorced and/or arguing parents are rarely seen. Realistic stories about making new friends are few. Girls do not excel, even in school; boys do not fail. Boys are multi-dimensional, never cry, and need no one. Girls are happy when they can serve others, and prefer watching to doing.

A year after the publication of Dick & Jane as Victims, the women wrote an addendum to their study:

> Following the publication of Dick and Jane as Victims, we have been in consultation with the publishers, in an effort to effect changes in school readers,

> as well as other instructional materials. Our efforts to make the publishers aware of the need for change have not, by and large, been heeded. Although some publishers seem to be sympathetic to our message, little action has been taken. We have reviewed and analyzed many of the newer series of readers, which have been issued since our book was published. Even the 1973 copyrighted textbooks continue to channel our children in the same traditional, unrealistic directions, with no allowance for differences in the emotional, physical, social, and intellectual development of each child.[2]

That statement was made in March, 1973. Since then, some progress has been made, but it is slow. As a result of law suits several of the publishing companies have promised all-out support--Houghton Mifflin, Random House, and Scott Foresman being among them. However, it is obvious that the publishing companies are not going to make drastic changes until a market for the revised materials develops. And a market won't develop until more people become aware of the problems and their implications.

Several recommendations can be made to deal with the situation in the interim. One is to complain--to publishers, principals, school boards, PTA's, etc. Try to make the problem known to the book purchasers and to the general public.[3]

Another recommendation is to use outside materials more extensively in the classroom. Several women's groups have compiled curriculum ideas in various disciplines to help avoid the stereotyping inherent in traditional materials. Two sources that we found helpful and informative are the Emma Willard Task Force on Education in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the Clearinghouse on Women's Studies in Old Westbury, New York.

Teachers' manuals for existing tests can be revised to a

degree by simply changing names, pronouns, and situations. For example, have students read a selection, discuss it as it was written, and then have them reconsider it with the characters' sex changed.[4]

Class discussion of the problem might also be considered. Ask the students to compare their reading materials to the real world. Or give them the opportunity to participate in some consciousness-raising activities. For example:

Draw a series of stick figures indistinguishable as to sex holding objects or doing something. Have the students make up stories about them.

Play some role-reversal games. Conduct a marriage ceremony in which the mother gives away the groom, they are pronounced woman and husband, and they become Mrs. and Mr. Jane Smith. Or have them conduct interviews with prominent men, asking them for their favorite home repair techniques, how they combine marriage and career, what size suit they wear, how they manage to stay young and handsome.

Make a list of words and phrases referring to unmarried women. Compare it to a list for unmarried men.

Have them compare their images of the ideal woman to their images of the ideal man--or the popular girl to the popular boy. Include a physical description, emotional characteristics, personality, and mannerisms.[5]

At home, you might consider watching your children's favorite TV shows with them. Point out the one-sided portrayal of women as seen in so many shows. Help your children to see the differences

between the fiction and their own potential.[6]

As far as other school programs are concerned, there are several recommendations to be made:

1. We should work toward changing school curricula by opening sex-segregated courses to both males and females, and by pointing out women's achievements and contributions in the various disciplines.

2. School staffing should present opportunities for women who seek leadership roles; opportunities should be available for female student leadership roles in school government and organizations.

3. The Guidance Office should be particularly careful to provide unbiased options to all sutdents; working women might be brought in on occasion to speak to school groups about careers.

4. Extra-curricular activities should be opened to both sexes. In particular, we should work toward integrating our sports programs, emphasizing to all students the value of physical good health throughout life.

In conclusion, we sould simply like to reiterate one of our opening statements. Sex-role stereotyping is not simply a limited perception of female potential. It also includes an exaggerated perception of male potential. As such, it teaches women that they may do only certain things in life and it teaches men that they can do anything they please. Women are given limited options, and are convinced at an early age that they should not even attempt to do things they might enjoy; men are given unlimited options, and are convinced that they must excel at whatever they choose to do. Neither is healthy, and it is up to those of us who are aware of the problem to do something about it.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Women on Words and Images, Dick & Jane as Victims; Sex Stereotyping in Children's Readers (Princeton, New Jersey, 1972), pp. 6-32, passim.

[2]Ibid., p. 58.

[3]Ibid., p. 38.

[4]Allene Dietrich, Statement by Allene Dietrich of the Committee to Study Sex Discrimination in the Kalamazoo, Michigan, Public Schools before the Subcommittee on Equal Opportunities, House Education and Labor Committee, September 13, 1973, p. 11.

[5]Emma Willard Task Force on Education, Sexism in Education (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1971), pp. 33-34, passim.

[6]National Education Association, Sex-Role Stereotyping in the Schools (Washington, D. C., 1973), p. 57.

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